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AUTHOR	Cohen, Arthur M.
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ABSTRACT

Projecting the future for U.S. community colleges into the early 21st century involves projecting the future for the United States in general. Based on trend data, it can be expected that the number of community colleges will not change, except to the extent that public universities organize additional two-year branch campuses or community colleges upgrade satellite centers to full campus status. Their mission will not change either, as their role in career, collegiate, developmental, and continuing education has become well accepted by the public and by state-level coordinating and funding agencies. Increases in community college enrollments will cause the number of associate degrees awarded to increase at a faster rate than currently as strengthened matriculation and attendance requirements reduce the percentage of casual attendees. These increases will also result in a slow increase in the number of faculty, although the ratio of part- to full-time faculty will remain stable at 40 to 60. In terms of governance, the trend toward greater state-level coordination will continue at a relatively slow pace. Finally, because capital funds will be in short supply and states will be unlikely to increase allocations to community colleges by more than a couple of percentage points each year, colleges will increasingly find outside sources for funding. The prognosis for the collegiate curriculum is good. The linkage aspect of the collegiate function, centering on preparing students to enter junior-level programs leading to bachelor's degrees in health fields, business, technologies and the professions will thrive. (Contains 11 references.) (MAB)

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Arthur M. Cohen
ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges

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ERIC® Clearinghouse for Community Colleges

University of California at Los Angeles
3051 Moore Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521
(310) 825-3931

Digest

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Projecting the Future of Community Colleges
by Arthur M. Cohen

Projecting the future for the community colleges of the early twenty-first century involves projecting the future for the nation in general: its demographics, economy, and public attitudes. This digest uses trend data to forecast the status of American community colleges over the next decade. If it seems conservative it is because it is based on the realities of the institutions, not on wishful thinking about what they should become.

The Number and Function of Community Colleges

The number of public community colleges will not expand. By 1975 a community college could be found within commuting distance of nearly all the people in all but a few states. The number has remained constant ever since, reaching stasis at just over 1000 (National Center for Education Statistics, October 1995). Change in this group will occur only to the extent that public universities organize additional two-year branch campuses or community colleges upgrade satellite centers to full campus status.

The function of the community college will not change either. The institution offering career, collegiate, developmental and continuing education has become well accepted by the public and by state-level coordinating and funding agencies. Thus, modifications will be in program emphasis, not in program type. For example, some institutions will strive toward expanded community services, as in contract education, building separately funded and managed programs that may grow to be as large as the traditional college services (Phelps, 1994).

The People Within

The absolute number of 18-year-olds in the United States will rise to 4 million by 2004. The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that over 3 of the 4 million 18-year-olds will graduate from high school in 2004 (January, 1995). The expectation that a large proportion of these students are planning on going to college is rising. In 1992, 78 percent of all seniors said they planned on attending a postsecondary institution immediately after high school graduation, up from 59 percent 20 years earlier (National Center for Education Statistics, June 1995). Although more than half plan on attending a four-year college, many will be diverted to community colleges as they find they cannot be admitted to the restricted freshmen classes at universities. As community college enrollments rise, the number of associate degrees awarded will increase at a faster rate as strengthened matriculation and attendance requirements reduce the percentage of casual attendees. The concept, "Let everyone in and let them take what they want," will not be heard anymore (Levin, 1993).

As a result of increases in college enrollments, the number of faculty is likely to increase, albeit slowly. However, this does not mean a change in the ratio of full-timers to part-timers. This ratio is likely to remain stable at 40 to 60 as administrators' desires to save money by employing part-timers and faculty organizations' ability to protect full-time positions offset one another (National Center for Education Statistics, October 1995). The faculty member's primary role as instructor and the number of hours that a full-time instructor spends in the classroom has not changed for decades (Russell, 1992) and is not likely to change.

Although current views about technology in the classroom often envision a fully learner controlled environment that is totally responsive to individual needs, historically such claims do not hold. The advent of phonograph, phone, radio, and TV all have brought with them claims of freeing instructors from their roles as information conduits, but this has never come to fruition. Regardless of the spread of multimedia and interactive technology-based education, classroom centered instruction will remain essential.

Governance and Finance

Few changes in the pattern of governance in community colleges are evident. However, there is a trend toward greater state-level coordination, but it will continue at a slow pace (Fonte, 1993). As the states become more involved with college policies, gaps in interinstitutional cooperation will be filled, and criteria for student matriculation and progress will be set. These pressures will result in efforts to micro-manage the administrative functions of community colleges, but they will have minimal effect on classroom instruction and student services. The thrust of state-level coordination focuses on reporting, compliance with regulations and accountability for numerous aspects of institutional operations; there is much room for local autonomy within those requirements.

In the area of finance, community colleges have a decided advantage over other higher education sectors when it comes to the cost of instruction. Although the precise amounts allocated to lower division instruction in the universities are rarely calculated with any reliability, the overall student cost differential is obvious. Community college instruction costs about one-half as much as the per-student costs in a comprehensive four-year institution and about one-fourth as much as in a public research university (National Center for Education Statistics, October 1995).

Despite the ability of the community college to provide low-cost education, it is quite unlikely that any state will increase

its allocations to community colleges by more than a couple of percentage points a year. Therefore, colleges cannot expect to fund wage increases or the costs of new programs, including the widely heralded instructional technology revolution, through traditional budget lines. Similarly, capital funds will be in short supply. In order to meet their financial needs, individual community college budgets will be augmented to the extent that local leaders are entrepreneurial (Hankin, 1992). Seeking grants from philanthropic foundations, finding public agencies with funds for staff training, and acquiring state funds for unique programs will be rewarded. Leasing the open areas on campus to agencies that want to conduct fairs, shows, and swap meets, for example, will be pursued with increasing vigor. Contract training has expanded rapidly and bodes to continue as a favorite way of mounting new, specialized programs that benefit local businesses while relieving a portion of the overhead that the college-credit programs bear.

Curriculum

The typical community college curriculum classified broadly as career, developmental, community and collegiate studies will continue into the future. Career education will remain prominent; there can be no reversing the perception that one of the colleges' prime functions is to train workers, and ample funds are available to support this function (Cohen and Ignash, 1994). Competition from the universities that develop programs in the technologies and from the proprietary schools and the publicly funded ad hoc job-training programs that teach the more specific skills will not change the central tendency.

A sizable amount of basic skill development will be necessary for many years merely to accommodate the backlog of functionally illiterate and non-native-English-speaking people in America (Ignash, 1994). No other postsecondary structure is in a position to provide this essential instruction. The community colleges will not only offer it on their own campuses, they will also expand their teaching of literacy in universities, lower schools and business enterprises.

The prognosis for the collegiate curriculum is good. The linkage aspect of the collegiate function, centering on preparing students to enter junior-level programs leading to bachelor's degrees in health fields, business, technologies and the professions, will thrive because entrance to those programs depends on students' completing courses in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, mathematics and English usage (Cohen and Brawer, 1987).

However, integrated general education will make little headway. The twentieth century has seen the slow rise of career education and, most recently, the acceptance of remedial studies as a legitimate collegiate function. A mandated, integrative education through which students gain historical perspective and a sense of the social and environmental trends that affect their future has yet to take center stage. In sum, except in the rare institution, general education will continue being debated in the context of distribution requirements.

Conclusion

Despite the massive growth in access to schooling and the vastly greater and diverse numbers who have enrolled, the communities from which they come have been little affected. Do the schools not build a better society? The individual mobility that they effect does not translate into reorganized cities, changed working conditions, modified immigration policies or much of anything else affecting the quality of life across the community. But did anyone but the most passionate, self-deceiving institutional advocates ever think that they could?

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